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"THE RING AND THE BOOK."

"THE POPE."

BY W. OSBORNE BRIGSTOCKE.

WE have heard it said that Browning would have made an excellent clergyman had he not found wider scope for his powers in the field of letters. If by "clergyman" was meant a spiritual teacher, the statement was eminently true. The person who noticed this must have felt that in Browning's writings religion and poetry go hand in hand. Men are liable to forget the close connection which exists between religion, philosophy and poetry. It has been customary to look upon the two latter as distinct from, if not antagonistic to, the Church. We have lost sight of the fact that religion is but a name for the higher regions of philosophy—its crown, as it has been called. Furthermore, our liturgy itself has become so familiar to us that we are often surprised when some especially beautiful passage catches our ear. Few of us are unmindful of the riches which our hymn books contain, but we need reminding that the Hebrew Psalter is one of the most perfect collections of poems ever written. It seems strange that we who possess a Bible and a prayer book, which, from a literary standpoint, justly take one of the foremost places in our libraries, should need to be reminded that poetry is not something less than truth, but its only adequate expression*. A host of prejudices disappears as soon as we grasp the fact that all our higher knowledge could be edited in two volumes, so to speak,—the first being philosophy, the second religion. The language of the first may be prose, but the only adequate expression of the second would be poetry. If this be the case, it is clear that those who believe that if Browning had written only prose he would have been a greater artist, either look at the function of poetry in a light

* Dr. Watson.

different from ours or mean that, since Browning was not always able to make himself intelligible in the language of poetry, he should have kept to prose. But it is evident from what we have already said that such a thought seems to us mistaken. We believe that Browning would have been ten times more obscure in prose. We cannot see what reasons can be given for supposing his involved style to be the result of a lack of power to wield the language. In our opinion such passages as we find in "Sordello" are merely proofs that his thoughts were often too great to be confined by words. All writers who open up new regions of thought seem obscure at first. A really great and inventing genius always adds words to the language, be he philosopher, scientist, explorer or poet. There are few people capable of criticising Browning's language. A man who could write a drama in fifty odd lines ("My Last Duchess"), who could picture music in words ("Abt Vogler"), who could transcribe the voice of nature ("Rabbi ben Ezra"), who could give such a stirring account of a sea fight ("Hervé Riel"), and who could do the hundred and one other feats which Browning did with words, can hardly be taken to book if at times his thoughts refuse all conventional shackles, and if in his despair he uses such sounds as "ginglingly" and "writhled" and makes words carry a weight of meaning to which they are not accustomed. To say that the words are not able to bear the strain is a rash statement, to put it mildly.

But we have wandered. We were considering the connection of religion, philosophy and poetry, and what claim Browning may have to be a spiritual teacher. We are reminded here of Montégut's essay on "Wilhelm Meister," in which he writes as follows:—"Eclairer est bien, brûler est mieux; éclairer et brûler à la fois est le comble de la perfection. Cette perfection sera-t-elle jamais atteinte? Viendra-t-il jamais, le poète qui à la lumineuse intelligence d'un Goethe joindra le feu ardent d'un Shakespeare et d'un Dante, qui sera à la fois le souverain des esprits et des cœurs, le maître de toute sagesse comme de tout heroïsme?" Shakespeare, he says, stands supreme. Dante and Goethe may also be said to be supreme in a different way. And yet, according to Montégut, there is room for another supreme.

If we call Shakespeare the king of poets—the most human—then we might call Dante and Goethe two queens—the most spiritual. There remains then a place for a poet spiritual *and* human, one as much at home in the real and visible world as in the unseen and eternal world. We know of but one candidate for this position—Browning. It is for posterity to estimate the value of Browning's writings as compared with Shakespeare's, Dante's or Goethe's, but we his contemporaries may boldly say that by the side of Shakespeare, the kingly sovereign, Dante and Goethe, the queenly sovereigns, none is worthy to stand as papal sovereign save Browning. Let it be understood that there is no question of comparison; we mean that in our opinion Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe and Browning are as supreme in their own kingdoms as are the rose, the lion and the eagle.

Judge Hughes in his preface to Lowell's poems* points out that the poet's epitaph (so to speak) is to be found in the poem to "Agassiz." In the same way we think we can say that Browning has given us the key to his position in his description of the Pope—"simple, sagacious, mild yet resolute, with prudence, probity and—what beside from the other world he feels impress at times."† It will be seen at once that these words contain the idea already expressed—the respect for earthly things—prudence and probity (note the words), and the spiritual aspect—intercourse with the other world.

Having expressed this opinion concerning Browning, we must in justice try to give at least some of the reasons which lead us to believe that he may rightly be called a Pope of the everlasting city of Poesy. It would be difficult to find for this purpose a more suitable book than "The Ring and the Book"—the fruit of Browning's maturity. It would be a grief to us were it proved that the tenth book, "The Pope," is in no way a reflection of the author himself. Browning can hardly have been half way through the fifties when he wrote "The Pope," and yet at that age a man begins to think of what must inevitably come—less activity of mind and body. The Pope was indeed 86 years old at the time of the

* Macmillan & Co., 1896.

† "The Ring and the Book" I. 1222.

trial, but there are many passages we like to think of as being unconscious portraits of himself, especially the one already quoted from Book I. But even if "The Pope" has nothing in common with Browning, we cannot but insist that the mind which created "The Ring and the Book" must have been at least as wise and as spiritual as the Pope's, as beautiful as Pompilia's, as heroic as Caponsacchi's, as deeply human as Guido's, and at the same time as superficially human as Violante's. This is wholesale praise, but we mean every word of it. "Paracelsus" is magnificent; but "The Ring and the Book" was written thirty years later,—thirty years added to a mind such as conceived "Paracelsus" is a long period.

We think most readers must find "The Pope" a difficult book at first. But after a time it will be seen to be marvellously clear and flowing, and one wonders at the art with which the picture of the Pope's mind has been drawn. Everyone knows that evening twilight is very conducive to retrospective thinking, but only those who have tried to trace the course of their thoughts under such circumstances know how difficult a task it is even to map it in the mind. The tenth book is a chart of the Pope's thoughts, and the rapidity with which he passes from one subject to another may be seen in line 1354, where he says, "leave matter then, proceed with mind!" followed in line 1361 by "leave man! conjecture of the worker by the work," and at the same time his brain is busy with another thread, arguing out what is man's conceivable height (1358) working up to the solution, "love without a limit," in line 1369. It would be worth while studying "The Pope" if only to admire the skill with which Browning develops thought after thought almost as naturally as a flow of conversation—the only difference being that we seldom, if ever, rise into such rarified atmosphere, except in our best moments. But we ourselves do not approach Browning in this spirit of connoisseurship. We prefer to look up to him, as Dante did to Vergil, as our master and guide. Admire him we may, when we can, but if his ideas and tastes differ from ours, let us acquiesce; or if that be too hard for some of us, let us at least admit the possibility of our being mistaken.

There, then, the Pope sits out the dim droop of a sombre February day in the plain closet where he works—

"His thoughts for company,
Grave, but not sad—nay, something like a cheer
Leaves the lips free to be benevolent,
Which, all day long, did duty firm and fast.
A cherishing there is of foot and knee,
A chafing loose-skinned large-veined hand with hand,—
What steward but knows when stewardship earns its wage,
May levy praise, anticipate the lord?
He reads, notes, lays the papers down at last,
Muses, then takes a turn about the room;
Unclasps a huge tome in an antique guise
That stands him in diurnal stead; opes page,
Finds place where falls the passage to be conned
According to an order long in use;
And, as he comes upon the evening's chance,
Starts somewhat, solemnizes straight his smile,
Then reads aloud that portion first to last,
And at the end lets flow his own thoughts forth
Likewise aloud, for respite and relief,
Till by the dreary relics of the west
Wan through the half-moon window, all his light,
He bows the head while the lips move in prayer,
Writes some three brief lines, signs and seals the same,
Tinkles a hand-bell, bids

. . . . bear as superscribed
That mandate to the governor forthwith"

After his day's work the Pope reads a portion in his "*épée de chevet*" and chances upon a passage strikingly appropriate. We all know what it is to receive a message from a book—not the hap-hazard oracles of words picked at random—but the true imbibing of the spirit of a book. But we are sure everyone would not profit by the story of Formosus as did the Pope, for it is apparently not given to all to realise that "history is philosophy teaching by examples," and we forget "to sum up what gain or loss to God came" of the examples about which we read. Having seen how his predecessors worked the Pope reverts to the result of his day's labour in order to try its value, and as his thoughts flow forth, not only shall we see how his mind has been working during the day, but we shall watch him actually repelling the attacks of the profoundest doubts.

His mind at once reverts to Guido. It is significant that his first and last reflections are the same. How his fancy

suggests that reprieve may perhaps be possible—Guido be acquitted without wronging his conscience. But he is quite aware that such a fancy is but "nature's craven trick" (line 207)—his judgment is irrevocable; and yet the same doubt recurs again (line 1966). Again he says that the facts are proved and incontestable, and yet "who plucks my sleeve? Friend or foe? What is the last word I must listen to?" Then follow three doubts—all of them means of avoiding condemnation to *death*. "Spare," then, "Death is too easy a punishment," and, lastly, "Forgive." All of which are answered by "Quis pro Domino? I who sign the sentence." The Pope is absolutely sure that Guido is guilty, and yet it needs all his force of character to take his life. He acknowledges that he has no hope for him except in such a suddenness of fate. He says he watched a storm*—

"I stood at Naples once, a night so dark,
I could have scarce conjectured there was earth
Anywhere, sky or sea, or world at all;
But the night's black was burst through by a blaze—
Thunder struck blow on blow, earth groaned and bore
Through her whole length of mountain visible;
There lay the city thick and plain with spires,
And, like a ghost disshrouded, white the sea,
So may the truth be flashed out by one blow,
And Guido see, one instant, and be saved.
Else I avert my face, nor follow him
Into that sad obscure sequestered state
Where God unmakes but to remake the soul
He else made first in vain; which must not be.
Enough, for I may die this very night:
And how should I dare die, this man let live?"

Thus we see that one of the thoughts on which his mind harps most continually is the awful responsibility of taking a life; only those who have faced it can know what it is. Needless though the warning may be, we wish to add that in our opinion the Pope's attitude is not necessarily an indication that Browning would have endorsed Wordsworth's sonnets on capital punishment. On the contrary, we consider that certain passages in "The Pope," notably line 1955, where he speaks of being not off the stage though close on the exit, indicates a breadth of mind sufficient to admit with Lowell, that "the next hour always shames the hour before," and

* "The Pope" (line 2119).

that "yesterday knows nothing of the best." By making the Pope preach the expediency of capital punishment, we would be minimising the value of the poem, if not actually misconstruing the spirit thereof.

Suddenly his eyes fall on the documents before him; he briefly recalls the evidence and feels the satisfaction of having evolved the truth. All is settled—and yet he does not touch the bell. He knows he is not irresolute, and yet he cannot help fancying to himself that another might think him so. And from this thought his mind leaps to the "surmise, that since man's wit is fallible," his may fail here. We watch his fancy conjure up an image to illustrate his position; he allays the doubt, "A man am I: call ignorance my sorrow, not my sin"; he knows he has not been slack in the use of his faculties, and stands on his integrity.

"For I am ware it is the seed of act,
God holds appraising in His hollow palm,
Not act grown great thence on the world below,
Leafage and branchage, vulgar eyes admire."*

If he hesitates he knows it is because he needs to breathe awhile and review intent the little seeds of act.

Then his mind goes out at the window, swiftly through the rain and empty streets, to the porticoes where he knows gossips must be assembled, and he pictures to himself how he and Guido are the topics of the hour. He smiles at the thought that the Swedish soothsayer would trip if he had to guess which of the two would be most likely to survive the other. But the thought of the possibility of his dying first sends his mind forth right into God's presence—at the judgment bar. He hears God ask him to show the fruit—the last act—of his life, and he reflects that he must plead the condemnation of Guido. No! His mind has overshot itself. No pleading, no words, to God or from God. Words are one of man's limitations. "God breathes, not speaks his verdicts, felt not heard,"† and after one swift journey in the "philosophy of the word," his mind returns to the level of to-day—"Be man's method for man's life at least."

All this has, so to speak, been the skirmishing. The real tactics of his mind now commence. We shall now see him

* "The Pope" (line 272).

† Book V., 1771.

summon from the past his ancient self—"that 'other me' there in the background"—to criticize his work. After reading the books which precede "The Pope," we shall have heard most of the facts of the tragedy repeated nine times. We ought therefore to be in a position to closely follow the Pope's analysis of all the characters, especially Guido's. The whole passage, from line 383 to line 1238 is a review and criticism of the actors in the drama. It is needless to dwell on them, for all who read Browning know them, and those who do not may without difficulty find "the riches that dispersed lie," by turning to the book, reading without skipping anything in the first seven books. It is with reluctance that we pass over many beautiful lines, but other portions call for comment, and our space is limited. We have reached line 1239.

The Pope is sitting in silence. The silhouettes of those he has just judged recede, and he is lost in thought. He wonders what a certain inward thrill may mean—a kind of cloud obscuring mental vision. He feels the tension of his will relax, and realises that something is affecting the very depths of his mind. He does not wonder long, for the doubt bursts with full force upon him. He doubts his divine calling, and yet he struggles against it; he still feels that "the soul is oracular." He speaks as he knows—yes, but what if his knowledge is a phantom—what if "his own breath, only, blew coal alight, he styled celestial and the morning star." It is a mighty doubt, and the aged Pope prepares himself to battle with it, for "all to the very end is trial in life." We will not venture to describe the unveiling of this soul. We only wish to follow the various phases of the struggle. By attempting to give anything like an idea of the depth of thought, we would be exposing not only our inability to confine a wealth of philosophic argument in a few hundred words, but a lack of taste in wishing to state in other words what Browning has so marvellously expressed for all who care to study the passage.

"Shall I dare try the doubt now?" exclaims the Pope, turning at once to God; "O Thou . . ." and in one thought gathers the whole universe, sweeping it through his mental forge, spreading it all out before him—the whole

* Charles Lamb.

range from God to the extreme of the minute—so as to ascertain his own position in the order of creation. He reminds himself that he has been appointed to represent God on earth. Swiftly his mind darts out into space again, and he compares his position to that of the world which—from among the myriad suns and star-swarms—has been chosen for stage and scene, "for God's transcendent act beside which even the creation fades into a puny exercise of power." "Incomprehensibly the choice is thine!" and we see him bow his head.

Then in a few words—the Gospel, he loved it first—and when his mind hungered he studied the word itself, and still found it wholly lovable. And then the thought of reason gives his mind an impetus for another marvellous survey—in quick succession, matter, man, mind, God—and interwoven with it the thread reaching from a human point of view to a view of the world as God sees it—soaring *the conceivable* height until God shows complete. And further than that even, he reaches into the dark, feels where he cannot see, and still believes. Back again to the earth to sum up the truth in one of the most inspired passages of the book—whether absolute or relative truth he cares not—he knows it is truth.

"What matter so intelligence be filled?

To a child, the sea is angry, for it roars;

Frost bites, else why the tooth-like fret on face?

Man makes acoustics deal with the sea's wrath,

Explains the choppy cheek by chymic law,—

To man and child remains the same effect

On drum of ear and root of nose, change cause

Never so thoroughly; so my heart be struck

What care I,—by God's gloved hand or the bare?"*

We will refrain from useless comment—the words speak for themselves. The struggle with this doubt ends with a confession that he does not perplex himself with certain riddles set to solve. "This life is training and a passage," and he asks—

"Solid truth

In front of it, what motion for the world?

The moral sense grows but by exercise.

'Tis even as man grew probatively

Initiated in Godship, set to make

A fairer moral world than this he finds,

Guess now what shall be known hereafter. Deal

Thus with the present problem. . . ."

* "The Pope," 1399.

† "The Pope," 1414.

Now he reviews the whole case in the light of victory. He reflects how very nearly evil triumphed over good, how it was only a chance thoughtlessness which prevented Pompilia's being lost and Guido saved. But he feels no surprise at the thought of such wrong; he realises that sinners in their efforts to overcome sin, strive—and that is growth. But when he thinks of those Christians who have professedly devoted their lives to Jesus' service—when he sees that those who hold the pearl in their hands prefer to "go dredge for whelks"—when he reflects on this, he is overwhelmed with surprise. He calls up the figures of the Christians—by profession—who have taken part in the drama. The aretine archbishop (lines 1454-1491), the monastery which sheltered Pompilia (lines 1492-1531) and Canon Caponsacchi all stand up for trial. We have already heard his opinion of the latter (lines 1095-1212) and we heard him say "Well done!" But now he judges him by a sterner rule. He does not blame Caponsacchi for what he did, but for the way in which it was done. The Canon had a panoply which he did not use—he went bravely, obediently, but blindly into the midst of the foe instead of using his helmet, shield and breastplate. The Pope declares the best is good enough for the world, but Christ wants better than the worldly best or nothing serves. What is the use of being a Christian if one cannot *outstrip* the natural man? But this he reflects appears to be a secondary consideration with many of Christ's soldiers. By far the most important questions it would seem are such as he mentions (lines 1591-1613) concerning the name by which the converts in China ought to designate God. They dally with things of secondary importance—giving them their whole attention and forgetting the weightier matters of the law. They fuss about the frontiers of Christendom and leave the cities a prey to internecine riots. This mediocrity among Christians makes the Pope wonder—as it must make all priests wonder—"whether this little is all that was to be . . . whether the thing we see is salvation" (lines 1614-1630). But he wishes to put no such question to himself. He within whose circle of experience burns the central truth—power, wisdom, goodness, God—says he must outlive Christ's religion "ere know it dead." He believes that Christianity has not been fathomed yet, and that it contains enough, and more than enough, spiritual food for him.

And yet there comes another doubt, as mighty as the last perhaps. It is the doubt which so frequently assails students when they read the annals of nations who knew not Christ—especially the records of Rome, of Athens, of India, and of other grand civilisations. It is not always possible to discover the root of a doubt, but in this case we think it will be seen that the Pope traces it to its very base. Without wishing in any way to enter upon the subject of cause and effect, it is necessary to mention the fact that the doctrine of the Church of England with regard to the whereabouts and future destiny of the souls of righteous "pagans" is not compatible with the philosophic application of the theory of evolution to the question of the past and future of the human race. This is the cause of the difficulty thinkers always experience when they attempt to reconcile the Church's teaching with philosophy. The difficulty naturally arises from a mistake on one side or the other—on which side, it is not for us to discuss now. But whatever may be the faults of philosophers, we feel entirely with the Pope that the Church is self-confident to a fault. If Christians realised more fully the beauty of the lives of many "pagans" (who lived without the hope of Christ's promise), and appreciated more deeply their own immense advantages, surely the study of heathenism would not evoke such comments as we often find relating to the inevitable fruits of polytheism—a sort of pity for the poor degraded wretches who still struggle in the darkness while we recline at ease in sunshine. The question, "*You have the sunshine now—where is the fruit?*" must inevitably come to all who—like the Pope—are open to the messages of history. "Paul, it is said, answered Seneca, but," adds the Pope, "that was in the spring-time: noon is now."

"Who is faithful now?"

Who untwists heaven's white from the yellow flare
O' the world's gross torch, without night's foil that helped
Produce the Christian act so possible
When in the way stood hero's cross and stake—
So hard now when the world smiles 'Right and wise!'"

The Pope answers—

"Is it not this ignoble confidence,
Cowardly hardihood, that dulls and damps,
Makes the old heroism impossible" †

* "The Pope" (line 1829).

† "The Pope" (line 1848).

This solution at once suggests to him the thought that perhaps this ignoble confidence will only be shaken by a tide of scepticism. The Church, safe inside the walls, no longer fears the lions—but perhaps the discarding of the Word by the next generation might, like an earthquake, shake even the walls to their foundations and rouse the Christians to their sense of duty and make them love their Faith to the extent of being ready to die for it—"which means alive at last." He sees stagnation in the Church, and knows that that means death. What if this pyrrhonism be destined to infuse new life into the Church? And yet the examples he has before him do not seem to have met with much success through preferring to act without Christ's guidance. Canon Caponsacchi, "the first experimentalist," has on the whole "danced the right step through the maze," but that was only due to the fact that his heart, being true, prompted him rightly. Had his heart been less well attuned, and his will less ready to act in harmony with his instincts, the result would have been fatal, for in the case in question Caponsacchi walked along the edge of a precipice, and one step to the side would have been his spiritual ruin. The abate also—"Loyola adapted to our time." Guido, Violante and Pietro all neglected the Church with sad results, and the only real bright spot in the tale is Pompilia, "Christian mother, wife and girl—which three gifts seem to make an angel up." It is clear enough that in this case the experiment of doing without the Christian rule of life has miserably failed, and this thought encourages him to have confidence in the sword and keys which are the insignia of his power on earth. His conscience does not yet allow him to resign them; whatever the power of these insignia may be in future ages, he feels that the world has not yet outgrown them, and that until something better than Christianity has been proclaimed Christ is the best guide and ruler of men's hearts.

Lastly comes the doubt already referred to; it requires one more effort of will to sign the death warrant. But though much is whispered in his ear (lines 1968-2098) his mind is soon made up: "Carry this forthwith to the governor."

Our object has been to express in a few words the reason for our unbounded admiration for this book. We have attempted to give a rough outline of the more important phases

of the Pope's reflections. If we have in any way succeeded in making clear the structure of the book, it will be easy for our readers to analyse each separate thought. This must be done if the whole of Browning's meaning is to be discovered. We hope that what we have suggested will convince some who have not yet studied it closely that "The Pope" will repay hours and hours of hard reading. The Pope's reflections have a meaning for us all, and the book is not so much record of what happened long ago, as a morsel of nature saturated with Browning's thoughts.

Many will be tempted to limit themselves to two or three portions of "The Ring and the Book" (Pompilia or Caponsacchi for instance), but this would be a mistake. Anyone who finds that "The Pope" repays study ought to take for granted that the *whole* book is meant to be read *as a whole*. To take only a portion means a one-sided view—

"Rather learn and love
Each facet-flash of the revolving year!
Red, green, and blue that whirl into a white,
The variance now, the eventual unity
Which make the miracle."*

One of the wisest of men has told us what the result will be if we fail to enjoy day as well as night, winter as well as summer, youth as well as age. † Life is a fragment of some great unknown; but we are units, and it is only by looking upon life and nature and books in every aspect that we can realise the eventual unity.

* "The Ring and the Book," I. 1360.

† Goethe: "Wahrheit und Dichtung," book 13.

FOR DISCUSSION.*

I.

CHILD - TRAINING.

It was with great pleasure that I read in the April number of the *Parents' Review* the Editor's protest on the subject of the Kindergarten, an institution which, in my humble opinion, has been over-praised to an extent that has beclouded judgment. Not that I deny the value of some of the ideas and methods classed under that name, provided that they are applied at a suitable time, and only up to a certain point. For ordered songs and games, however pretty, lose their value by the repetition that destroys their spontaneity, and the teacher full of enthusiasm for a theory is apt to view her charges through a rose-coloured haze that blinds her to some of the subtler effects of her skilful teaching.

I once was enabled to watch the progress of a Kindergarten class in a very poor London street, where I thought such teaching would be an unmixed good since these little mites, unused to good habits or even to cleanliness, were the very material on which to work. Undoubtedly they did benefit by a training which gave them new pleasures and some elementary notions of mutual help and consideration. At first the songs and games were a joy, but on my last visit I felt convinced that some sturdy rebellious little boys were distinctly bored. † They had my sympathy, for when I recollected the varying imaginations and interests of the games in which I delighted, I knew that I should have detested these regulated make-believes.

This, however, is not the place for a detailed criticism of Kindergartens; the pith of the matter was expressed by a very able American schoolmaster who told me that the only

* The Editor invites discussion on these papers.

† I have lately heard a bored boy's excellent criticism. "When I play I like to make a jolly noise, and when I work I like to work."